DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 373 510 EC 303 279

AUTHOR Beigel, Andrew R.
TITLE Peer Teaching and Special Education Preparation.
PUB DATE [93]
NOTE 11p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disabilities; Elementary Secondary Education; Experiential Learning; Higher Education; Lesson Plans; *Peer Teaching; *Preservice Teacher Education; Self Evaluation (Individuals); *Simulation; Special Education; *Special Education Teachers; Student Development; Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper describes the application of peer teaching to the training of prospective special education teachers. This approach emphasizes practicing the teaching act in a safe environment, i.e., one in which young learners are not at risk and in which the prospective teacher can receive feedback from peers and the instructor without fear of being graded by a supervisor. Prior to implementation of peer teaching episodes, students receive instruction in lesson planning and use of a systematic observation instrument to aid in instructional analysis. Each student then randomly selects a card which presents a "piece" of content to be taught, an age group, and the description of a child or children with a disability. The prospective teacher then prepares a lesson plan and materials seeking assistance from peers or professionals as well as the literature. Following lesson presentation to peers, feedback is provided by peers, the student evaluates his own teaching, and the student meets with the instructor for an individual conference. This approach has been positively received by students themselves, cooperating teachers, and supervisors. (DB)

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Peer Teaching and Special Education Preparation

Andrew R. Beigel, Ph.D.

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PEER TEACHING AND SPECIAL EDUCATION PREPARATION

Andrew R. Beigel, PhD
Assistant Professor - D'Youville College
Buffalo, New York

B.O. Smith (1980) has suggested that the worth of any of the helping professions is found in how well that profession aids those who need their help. According to many researchers, parents, advocates for exceptional children and teachers of exceptional learners special education is not proving its worth -- it is failing to help those who need its help most (Lipsky and Gartner, 1992). The validity of this notion is open for debate, but there can be no doubt that special educators must leave their preparation programs with improved self-analytic skills, a greater reliance on themselves as decision-makers and refined skills as teacher-researchers. Without these skills special educators will not be able to serve those who are in need of their help.

To gain the aforementioned attributes prospective teachers must focus on the teaching act. Prospective special educators are no different -- they too must examine the teaching act with the emphasis being on determining ways to modify the teaching act to meet the needs of the learners they instruct. The traditional pedagogy class of lecture, out-of-class activity and class discussion does not have a lasting impact on preservice teachers when they begin their field practicums and when they begin teaching in their own classrooms (Richardson-Koehler, 1988). To provide prospective special educators with the opportunity to begin

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to gain the capability to analyze their own teaching and to find a sense of self-reliance practice must be provided in a safe environment.

A safe environment is one in which the prospective special educator does not have to contend with classroom discipline problems. A safe environment does not focus the special educator on insuring that young learners are indeed learning at an appropriate level. A safe environment is one in which the prospective special educator can examine his or her own performance without the fear of being graded by a supervisor (Good, Biddle, and Brophy, 1975). In these safe environments prospective special educators can present lessons to their peers, receive feedback from their peers and be videotaped for future analysis. Following each lesson the prospective special educator has the opportunity to review the videotape, to carefully think about the comments from their peers and then, in writing, react to this material. In addition the prospective special educator has the opportunity to view the videotape with the instructor and discuss the manner in which the lesson proceeded.

The content of these lessons must be at a level that will not force the prospective special educators to do content research to know how the material should move on. Nor should the prospective special educators have to do great amounts of research to have a reasonably sophisticated level of understanding about the material. The familiarity that the prospective special educators have removes the "newness

phenomena", that is the fear that their content knowledge is not sufficient to meet the needs of the learners. Rather the content should lead prospective special educators to examine the content of the lesson in terms of what they know about themselves, about learners in general and exceptional learners specifically (Feinman-Nemser and Buchmann, 1985).

Prior to beginning any peer teaching episodes the prospective special educators receive instruction in lesson planing. This includes the creation of objectives, how to plan for a teaching-learning procedure and how to plan to evaluate the lesson to see if what the learners have acquired. At no time during this instruction are the prospective special educators presented with specific strategies to use when teaching. Rather they are presented with a blueprint for preparing to teach, the strategies they use they must develop on their own. The purpose for this is to avoid having the prospective special educator come to believe that there is only one way to teach any piece of material.

In addition to this instruction the prospective special educators are presented with a systematic observation instrument to aid in instructional analysis. The *Withall Social-Emotional Climate Index* (*SECI*) is the instrument that is presented. The *SECI* is used because it is relatively uncomplicated to use and gives the user insights into the climate of the classroom and the focus of the lesson in terms of interactions. This is important for the prospective

special educator to work with as climate as perceive by the student has an impact on the quality and quantity of learning that occurs.

Following this instruction each prospective special educator randomly selects a content card. The content card contains a "piece" of content to be taught, an age group and the description of a child or children with a disability. The handicap is presented in some detail so the prospective teacher can plan more effectively. The plan must include teaching techniques that will allow the child or children to be taught in a regular education setting and include all children in the learning environment.

The prospective teacher then prepares a lesson plan and all materials necessary to teach the lesson. During this lesson preparation time the prospective teacher is free to seek the help of any professional or their peers. The objective for this is to encourage the prospective teacher to gain professional interaction skills and to gain insights into the manner in which teachers in the field perform their tasks. In addition the prospective special educator is encouraged to examine the literature relating to current practice and theoretical literature to acquire the skills of interpreting the current knowledge base. It is during this time of planning that prospective special educators begin to develop their own personal knowledge base of teaching exceptional learners.

It is vital that we as teacher educators ask questions of these prospective special educators. As Griffin (1987) says ""Teaching is complex, often ambiguous and frequently non-linear." (p.28) and it is this ambiguity that requires us to ask teachers to examine their own beliefs and motives for teaching in order to cope with this ambiguity.

The prospective special educator delivers a portion of a lesson to a group of peers. The segment of the lesson that is delivered is tied to the topic being discussed in the "lecture" segment of the class. Following the first three lessons the instructor and the prospective special educator then meet and decide the focus of the rest of the lessons. This decision is based on the self-analysis of the prospective teacher and the instructor's examination of the lesson plan and the viewing the of the videotape of the lesson segments presented.

Following the presentation of the lesson the prospective teacher analyzes the lesson. The self-analysis is based on the feedback of the prospective special educator's peers who received the lesson, a comparison between intents as expressed on the lesson plan and peer interpretation, the *SECI*, and their own beliefs about teaching exceptional learners. In addition the instructor provides the prospective special educators with a list of questions to respond to. These questions are:

1. What did I like about my teaching performance -- how did it match my beliefs about teaching?

2. What did I not like about my teaching performance -- why did I not like it and how would I change what I did not like?

3. What information did I gain about teaching from the *SECI* and my peers?

4. What area(s) do I want to work on for my next lesson -- what am I looking for and why?

These questions provide the prospective special educators with a set of guidelines or a framework for self-analysis. The prospective special educators are not required to respond to these questions in any format, nor is there a required number of responses. Rather, the prospective special educators are required to examine their own teaching performances and compare these performances to their beliefs about teaching.

Following the self analysis the prospective special educators meet with the instructor for an individual conference. During these conferences the prospective special educators talk about what they did during the lesson performance, why they did it and what they hoped to have accomplished by the methods used. In addition the prospective special educators are asked to reflect on what their beliefs on teaching exceptional learners. This also provides the prospective special educators with the opportunity to discuss what they have read in the various materials used in lesson preparation and the discussions with other professionals.

The responses to this procedure have been most positive. One prospective special educator commented that she was able to focus more clearly on how her behaviors affected the student's learning in the classroom. Another prospective special educator said that she was better able to see how to modify her teaching behaviors to aid the students in her classroom. Many of the cooperating teachers have expressed delight in how well the prospective special educators acting as student teachers in their classrooms are able to evaluate their own performance, to talk about teaching, and to accept criticisms and praise. The supervisors of these students have commented on how well these prospective special educators listen and talk about teaching exceptional learners. It is these discussions between the supervisor and the prospective teacher that are at the heart of teacher growth (Goldhammer, Anderson and Krajewski, 1993).

Returning to the idea that Smith (1980) evinced that the worth of a profession is found in its ability to help those who need its help, then we as teacher educators must seize every opportunity to help those individuals who want to become teachers. For it is through our modeling of this behavior that the prospective special educators will learn that this is the heart of special education and return special education to a point where indeed it is helping those who need its help.

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